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Army Cook Relates Experiences

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The army cook, in preparing large quantities of food "like we had back in the States," helps to maintain broad grins and good spirits among the men serving overseas in the armed forces

Army Cook Relates Experiences

Corporal Fred Graham, Army cook stationed in Italy writes a description of Italian living conditions, wartime customs, food and homes

"WARTIME is not the time to know the real life of the old world," writes Cpl. Fred Graham, stationed in Italy. "It is unreal and distorted now, brutal and almost hopeless at times. Yet against all this suffering and want, there is the intrigue of the romance and history of the place which keeps one in a continuous dramatic coma!"

"The people dress very poorly, for the war has taken all they have. An Arab's chief delight is to have a G.I. mattress cover to wear; he will gladly pay \$10 for one. The unwashed rabble wear camouflage cloth, 'gunny sacks' or canvas—anything to cover themselves—and go barefoot or wear cloth slippers.

"In the big cities, however, there are fine, prosperous looking people, fastidious in dress. Black seems to be the everyday color. In Rome and Florence the ladies wear lovely suits, dresses and coats as we know them in America. I saw one who had a beautiful suit, smart and chic, tailored from an American army blanket!"

"Clothes are expensive. I bought two dressing gowns for soldiers to send home, one a light blue silk, \$30, and the other, a turquoise chiffon velvet, \$65. Silk stockings are from \$5 to \$10 a pair and shoes from \$40 to \$100 a pair. Shopping is my greatest thrill. There are many exotic things, along with the junk. Jewelry, leather and alabaster have been my own choices of things to send home.

"The people in Italy are church-minded. The na-

tional wealth has poured into the monumental cathedrals for centuries. They are naturally affectionate and temperamental, love their art and music, especially opera. I saw the opera 'Tosca' only last week.

"Sunday is a big day and is celebrated by walking around the town—the *passaggio* or *passaggiare-ing* as I say. It is the same as our promenade on the board walk at Atlantic City. Week days all business ceases from noon to 3 o'clock, when the people go home to eat and relax. The mid-day meal is their best. They have coffee, a mixture of chicory, nuts, ground corn and other grains, for breakfast and a supper about 8 at night.

"Funeral processions are ancient and somber. The coffin, a kite-shaped, stained wooden box, is carried on the shoulders of men in black gowns and hoods to the fancy hearse pulled by decrepit horses, one to four in number. Three of the black-garbed men precede the horses, walking, carrying a crucifix on a long pole flanked by two lamps with lighted candles in them, also on long poles. The priest follows the three, then comes the hearse, and finally the family and mourners, walking behind the coffin, carrying umbrellas in bad weather. Outside the city gate in the ancient wall everyone converses awhile, shakes hands, and returns to the city.

"G.I. traffic is everywhere, rambunctious, noisy and frightening. Most of the people ride bicycles or walk. In Africa, camels are used domestically, as well as horses and donkeys. In Sicily the whole island blossoms with their gaily decorated two-wheeled carts drawn by horses, donkeys or toy burros or *assinos*, native to Sardinia. The bright carts are ablaze with pictures of opera scenes or ancient characters of legend and history in colors, predominantly red, yellow, white and blue. In southern Italy one sees oxen and horses

pulling great carts with monstrous wheels 6 feet in diameter, which carry heavy loads. In the fields these animals are used for farm work. Blindfolded oxen are used for turning the waterwheel which lifts the water from a well to the irrigation canal.

"The crude methods of food preparation are amazing to us. Water is carried from the nearest spout, public fountain or well. The kitchens have a tile sink arrangement with a grill for burning wood or charcoal over which the food is cooked or a metal oven placed.

"The cold stone houses have no heat. A scaldino is used by each member of the family or passed around. It is a pottery or brass bowl with a bail-type handle filled with glowing charcoals which are stirred up now and then to encourage some warmth. They even use a rack upon which this gadget may be hung under the covers of the bed to heat you while sleeping.

"There is not much civilian food available in the war-torn countries, and what food there is is very expensive. The people are hungry everywhere. They beg servicemen for food all the time—chocolate, bread, candy, gum and cigarettes. Boys wait around the Red Cross snack bar, hoping that someone might give them a cookie when he comes out onto the street.

"Some of our dances in Sicily ended in riots for the food when the sandwiches, cookies and coffee were served. The entire family would join in the melee and the poor soldiers had to run for their lives. The signorinas would smuggle the food out in their stocking tops or bosoms, and return for more to take to mama, who filled her shopping bag with food to take home. They even brought bottles for the coffee.

"It was my job to decorate the ball room for these occasions. We spent a lot of money for flowers, but the place was festive. After the first dance in Palermo, which initiated the food riot, I came upon a novel idea. Flowers were scarce, unchoice and expensive in February, so I bought a variety of vegetables at the market, cauliflower, broccoli, spinach, squash, onions, garlic, turnips and celery. After cleaning and trimming them we made arrangements on all the tables and ledges with a lighted candle in the center of each. Before the dance had finished, all the vegetables had found their way into the shopping bags that mama had brought, or the baskets that papa carried, or even the little nets that the children dragged along. We saved money; the ballroom was just as colorful; we had done a good deed, and there was no riot that night—even the soldiers got some spam and cheese sandwiches and oatmeal cookies!

"The most pitiful circumstance in southern Italy, Sicily and Africa was to see the poor people picking over our garbage for bits of food. In great 5 gallon cans, I saw native women carrying away refuse to be revamped into food. They walked with the cans balanced on their heads, elbows akimbo, as chic and haughty as a debutante on Fifth Avenue. Our chow lines and kitchens were always haunted with a gathering of hangers-on hoping for some morsel of food. Soldiers often save what they do not need, carrying something to the children or old men and women, or taking an 'adopted' child once a day through the line for a square meal. . .

"On the street corners of Palermo vendors have stands where they sell snails to eat. The juice from a half lemon is squeezed into the snail, the snail is sucked from his shell, and the shell thrown away. I ate a bite of octopus tentacle there. The vendor had it boiling

in a can over a wood fire. He cut off a piece and I ate it. It tasted much like fish, but very slimy and slick.

"Another vendor was selling the entrails of a cow, the brains and the tongue. The stomach looked tough, so I took a bit of tubing. It was not bad in taste but hard to chew.

"Restaurant foods are not too good. I had always wanted to come to Europe to eat, but I am sadly disappointed in wartime. Our most repulsive dish—C rations—is heavenly compared to the native hand-outs. Our special army dinners are banquets just like home—turkey, chickens, pork and pork chops and beef. They occur quite frequently, too—for example, we had chicken tonight, for no reason at all!

"At Papa Gouin's in Casablanca, we had steak, chops, or fish, with a green salad, hors d'oeuvres and fruit with cheese. It was not as good as it sounds. Other places served mutton, liver and egg omelet.

"In Tunis we stopped at a dive where we were served cold spaghetti, beans, a sausage and pockmarked fruit. In Palermo, we had many of our spaghetti dinners at Mama Peppervich's. Her spaghetti was delicious, served with soup, endive salad, tomatoes, wine and steak of unknown origin. I always steered away from the steaks—they were too expensive and always had a twang of equestrian ancestry.

"Hotel Belvedere in Vomero, in the exclusive section of Naples, is where I went for lunch on the veranda. The view of Naples, the bay and Vesuvius was magnificent. For \$1.10 I had two fried eggs, six slices of fried spuds and coarse French bread.

"One day in modern Pompeii I took the soldiers I had conducted on a tour of the ancient ruins to a garden cafe I knew about. I ordered a steak, which turned out to be two pieces about the size of half dollars. I knew it was not beef, lamb or horse, and since the cat would not eat it—the cat is not cannibalistic—I put the meat between two slices of bread and gave it to the native boy for a tip. He was grateful and didn't mind the taste at all. Eggs, about 30 cents apiece, are the safest food to order. There is little flour, and even vegetables are high. Fuel wood costs 4 cents a pound.

"Rome and Florence had no public places to eat. G.I. restaurants are adequate, and the Red Cross snack bars take care of emergency tie-overs. The markets here have everything in season—vegetables, fruits (fresh and dried), nuts—but they appear in disreputable condition. The meats displayed include goat, lamb, beef, rabbit and poultry hanging in the open air. The fish markets have eels, clams, lobsters, crabs, shrimp, octopuses, shark, sardines, swordfish and tiny translucent fish that look like pink spaghetti and are eaten raw.

"Roasted castagna or chestnuts, which are sold on the street, are used in a variety of ways. They are good, but black and sooty from the smoke of the crude fire. The meats inside are mealy, and are sometimes made into flour from which delicious castagna cake is made and served piping hot. Peanuts and filberts are common, too. These items of nature are not accessories, but necessary food products for the people.

"Sliced potatoes fried in deep olive oil, eaten with the fingers and served with salt and wine are delicious. A favorite dessert is sugared dried figs stuffed with half an English walnut. The Italian cured olives are too strong and bitter for our California palate. The olives are green, black or spotted, shriveled and offensive to look at. Tangerines and the blood orange of Sicily are juicy, but the oranges and apples are mediocre."